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ABSTRACT

A previously relatively unexplored area of theater history studies is the quantification of titles, authors, and locations of productions of plays in Canada and the United States. Little is known, for example, about the number of times any one play was staged, especially in the earlier days of American drama. A project which counts productions on a city-by-city basis could be the foundation for whole new insights into general theatrical entertainment. The period of 1890 to 1910 had been selected for study because it is relatively unknown. For the same reason, 25 secondary American cities are surveyed. The project is an ongoing one, with productions in ten cities thus far surveyed. (CH)

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A Quantification Approach to Popular American Theatre: Outline

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Theatre historians have, traditionally, employed research methodologies borrowed from our colleagues in English Departments; indeed, many of the early theatre historians were themselves products of English departments. In consequence, much of the published scholarship in our field traces the development of themes through plays, discovers historically verifiable influences on playwrights, and analyzes literary schools or movements--a sort of history of dramatic literature. Perhaps in reaction, theatre historians-- among them the senior members of our profession today--turned to a history of theatrical architecture, examining in exhaustive detail the size, shape, and general configuration of the physical playhouse. Both approaches are necessary and valid, although like any research methods they can produce excesses. I would like to describe another approach which I have found helpful, that of quantification, while hastily disavowing any intimation that quantification techniques are the wave of the future, or that Ohio State's venerable Theatre Research Institute is becoming a hotbed of statistics--seeking keypunch operators.

To begin with definitions: quantification means, quite literally, the process of determining the number of something, or simply counting bits of data. I will attempt to outline some general areas in which counting bits of data might be helpful to the theatre historian, and then discuss in somewhat greater detail a project I'm currently involved with which relies heavily upon this particular methodology. It should be apparent that quantification techniques are not applicable to all periods or all geographic areas, since the method assumes a large field of information susceptible to being quantified.

So: what, about the theatre of the past, can be counted, in a way which will materally assist our comprehension of theatre's history? Some specific areas are:

1. Productions in selected theatres or cities (it is now possible, for example, with the completion of The London Stage, to compile relatively accurate figures on frequency of specific plays and of the nature of the repertory for the period those volumes cover, or any portion of it; it is also possible to use Genest in this manner--making proper allowances for his inaccuracy--for the period 1800-1830, not listed in The London Stage (although for only two theatres). Similar work can be done for New York through the use of Odell; and, of course, newspapers provide much the same information. All such compilations can provide fairly accurate information on the frequency of production as well as the frequency of specific types of plays.
2. Box office figures, where available (Poggi's work, and that of Bernheim before him, provides a ready model for this sort of thing, while the weekly box office figures reported in Variety could well be employed for the twentieth century American theatre. Numerous account books exist in various museums and special collections, and bank records themselves--some of the English banks are especially conscientious in retaining deposit and withdrawal records for their customers--can provide clues as to the fiscal status of theatres, managers, and actors. Financial data should give clear view of popularity

of a production, play, performer, or theatre company).

3. Engagements of touring combinations (listings, for the United States, in Variety and the earlier New York Dramatic Mirror supply much of this information, while for earlier periods one would have to go to scattered journalistic reports to answer such questions as, where did Mrs. Siddons go after her disastrous London debut, and what did she play?).
4. Analyses of acting companies (for example, a seminar examining early 19th century Covent Garden promptbooks at OSU this Spring discovered that the actors' "lines of business" were more important than any consideration of verisimilitude in terms of their ages, leading to several implications concerning the acting style which could, if strengthened by further study, lead to some adjustments regarding the acting of Kean, Macready and Kemble.)
5. Analyses of scenic practices (numerous lists of stock scenery have been discovered and published; it should be possible, by comparing such lists with actual prompt book notations, to establish a fairly standard group of stage sets for the 18th and 19th centuries. Little's work with the wall frescos at Pompei, for a more classical example, relies heavily upon simply counting the number of times specific scenes reappear to indicate their theatrical connotations, while his work on the Villa of Mysteries--which posits theatrical reverberation--is based on a symbolic interpretation of repetitions of poses

and individuals within the fresco cycle).

B. Positive benefits of the quantification approach should include:

1. The fact that objectively verifiable data for a given period of theatrical production can thus be obtained. (Charles Kean is still known for his Shakespearian productions, yet by examining records Glen Wilson demonstrated that his 'gentlemanly' melodrams actually received more performances. A related question: Was the 19th century stage in fact dominated by melodrama, as is usually assumed? What kinds of plays did Robert Elliston most frequently offer at Drury Lane? How many performances of Ibsen were actually given during the 1890's in London? in Germany? in Scandinavia? in the United States? How many obscene pantomimes did the degenerate Romans produce, and how many comedies? In the last instance, did the change the early Church Fathers assure us occurred in the first two centuries A.D., from theatre to lavish and brutal spectacle, actually occur? How often were the Hellenistic theatres used for non-theatrical purposes, and what were those purposes?

2. The avoidance of the 'prodigious fallacy' as defined by David Fischer: the viewing of history as a series of prodigious events (the first box set, the first perspective scenery, the first historically accurate costume, the first woman on the English stage, the first actor, and so forth) rather than as a series of events in which the prodigious is prodigious precisely because it is atypical. This view assumes, of course, that theatre history is concerned with the history

of theatrical entertainment in general, not just with those specific events which culminated in the proscenium-arched, realistic theatre.

3. An awareness of the ordinary theatrical experience in specific periods, often bypassed in efforts to discover the parameters of exciting, unusual, or historically important performances (what did Planché do when he wasn't designing King John or writing the history of British costume; what was it like at the Theatre Dionysus when you lost; did all those cloud machines in the Renaissance really work all the time; was the usual performance on the Restoration stage as exciting as the opening of The Country Wife; what, in short, was the every-day humdrum theatrical experience like in the past?).

As with any research approach, the quantitative can lead to excesses.

C. Inherent dangers of quantification methods can (and often do) include:

1. A reliance upon numbers for numbers' sakes, with an overemphasis upon statistical methodology (the counting-the-angels-on-the-head-of-a-pin syndrome, most apparent in the new, computer-based concordances, which tell the reader proudly how many times a playwright uses the word "the" with appropriate line citations, or the intriguing problem of how many restrooms were available to the public in the Berlin operahouse and how many seats each had, rather than being concerned with what that means).

2. An allied danger is the failure to develop criteria of significance, as the sociological study which, after exhaustively

comparing Los Angeles air pollution charts with opinion surveys, discovered that people who like their neighborhoods and houses suppress awareness of smog while people unhappy with their surroundings are equally unhappy about smog. Which doesn't really tell us very much. For a theatrical example: I had access to complete promptbooks, correspondence, and box office records for the management of the Playhouse, London, by Dame Gladys Cooper during the years 1927-1933, which permitted me to rather completely reconstruct her productions, her plans for them as opposed to the actual performances, and their popularity in terms of box office success. All of which is interesting, but is no more than a footnote: Gladys Cooper is not a central figure in British theatre during that particular period. Although certainly my master's thesis did not admit that fact.

II. Quantification applied to turn-of-the-century American popular theatre.

A. Background to the study:

1. The period is usually dismissed as one of 'triumphant commercialism' (to use Brockett's wholly accurate phrase), and seen as a period important only insofar as it sets the stage for the later development of O'Neill and the exciting theatre of the 1920's and 1930's. It is ordinarily used as an example of the American theatre before it "came of age."

2. The period is also one of extreme activity in professional theatre (as Poggi demonstrates), and the last period in which theatrical entertainment functioned as a mass medium. As such, it deserves study for its own sake, not solely for its status

as a background against which O'Neill and his contemporaries reacted.

3. Numerous theses and dissertations exist (over thirty have thus far been identified through Litto, Stratman, and the annual lists in the ETJ) which chronicle local theatres and which--in most cases--provide chronological listings of plays performed in the areas they discuss.

B. Methodology employed:

1. Compilation--by title and author--of all productions for the approximate period 1890-1910 for following 25 cities in the United States and two in Canada:

Ann Arbor, Michigan
Charlotte, North Carolina
Denver, Colorado
El Paso, Texas
Fargo, North Dakota
Fresno, California
Jackson, Mississippi
Kansas City, Missouri
Lexington, Kentucky
Little Rock, Arkansas
Los Angeles, California
Madison, Wisconsin
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Nashville, Tennessee
Oakland, California
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
Portland, Oregon
Richmond, Virginia
Rochester, New York
San Antonio, Texas
Savannah, Georgia
Seattle, Washington
Sioux City, Iowa
Toronto, Ontario
Vancouver, B.C.

2. The first phase of the research is presently in progress. The resultant data base is subject to several qualifications:

a. Cities represented are those for which chronological listings currently exist; there is therefore no assurance that productions in these cities are in any way representative of the American theatre as an entirety (the Canadian cities are included for that reason, to see if any differences emerge, or if the pervasiveness of American commercial control extended north).

b. The accuracy of the listings, although presumably of a high standard, may well be suspect.

c. The relationship between cities with large and small populations is not at all clear at present; many smaller cities saw only those productions which toured, and were not the homes of resident stock companies.

d. Therefore, only crude results can be expected from this arbitrary random sampling.

3. Compilation of raw data, with computer assistance, will follow in order to determine:

a. those plays with the greatest number of performances

b. those plays with the greatest number of productions

c. those plays performed most frequently by stock companies

d. those plays performed most frequently by touring combinations

e. those specific genres of dramatic literature--if differentiation criteria can be developed--most frequently performed

f. those playwrights whose work was most frequently performed

g. regional differences in repertory, if any

4. Analysis of data to provide the beginning answers to some of the

questions left unanswered by previous approaches to the topic:

a. In the period of blatantly and manifestly commercial theatre, what was most frequently presented on North American stages?

b. Does frequency of presentation correlate at all with popularity?

c. Does the monopoly of the Theatrical Syndicate mean national uniformity of theatrical entertainment?

d. Do the kinds of plays presented reveal the specific concerns of the American society at the turn of the century identified by social historians?

e. What do the plays most frequently presented have in common? In short, do patterns emerge?

Although the data bank itself is, at present, far from complete, initial analyses have been undertaken to provide some indication of the types of conclusions the study might provide. Performance records for nine cities have thus far been incorporated into the system; not surprisingly, Uncle Tom's Cabin was the most frequently performed play, with most of its performances being offered by the many TOM companies which crisscrossed the country ceaselessly during this period. Also not surprisingly, the second and third plays on the list of most frequently performed were also venerable melodramas: East Lynne and The Two Orphans. If, however, the twenty-five plays most frequently produced are examined, it becomes apparent that the staple diet of the American theatre--or at least that portion of it represented in the sample--was not particularly melodramatic. Uncle Tom's Cabin, East Lynne, and The Two Orphans are the only full blown melodramas

on the list. Most of the plays are modern--i.e., first produced after 1890; a significant number (ten of twenty-five) fall into the general category of 'historical romance'--plays which are serious in intent and which employ exotic locations and characters. Such plays as Belasco's Za Za and Girl of the Golden West, Potter's Under Two Flags and Broadhurst's The Holy City share certain common features: they present elaborate and elevated situations which transcend (both in plot and character) the everyday world of the spectacularly realistic melodrama. The mass audience was not, apparently, flocking to see only The Queen of the Highbinders, Shadows of a Great City and Nettie the Newsgirl; they also patronized, to a markedly greater extent, Old Heidelberg and Trilby. In short, the first tentative results suggest that the popular American theatre at the turn of the century was not dominated by Owen Davis's ten-twent-thirt melodramas, but by far more seriously-intended plays. I cannot, at this stage of the project, draw more definite conclusions; but it seems apparent that the American theatre provided far more sophisticated, serious and diverse entertainment than most sources would have us believe. It was certainly escapist; whether that escapism resulted in perceivable trends remains to be established.

III. Some conclusions on the subject of quantification

A. Emphasis here has been upon British and American theatre of the 19th and 20th centuries, which reflects both my own present work and the periods which most clearly lend themselves to quantification methods.

B. Quantitative work can be profitable for other periods, as witnessed by scholars such as Lough, Collins, Prosser and Pedicord,

all of whom employ some degree of quantitative methodology for portions of their work.

C. The methods I've outlined and the areas I've tried to suggest are crude; clearly statistical training and competence are necessary for any sophisticated use of quantification tactics.

D. Although quantitative research is only one methodological approach available to the theatre historian, it is one which has not been widely exploited and therefore calls for much closer examination than it has previously received. If nothing else, it can remind us rather forcefully that theatre is a group, if not always mass, entertainment, and that its value for historical study lies in precisely that aspect of its appeal.